

## Progressive Counseling *Delivering the Improvement Message*

By Carol Westberry

Picture this: The very best employee you've ever had just stormed into your office threatening "If YOU don't do something about Mr./Ms. Nightmare I'm out of here! They've messed up another job and I'm the one who had to take the heat. You need to do something!" As you listen, you think to yourself, I'm short staffed and the workload is going through the roof. I've got to figure out how to get to everything done yesterday and now this. What do they think I am – Magic? Of course, your actual response to this overwrought employee is that you'll take care of matter immediately.

Sound familiar? Well, you're not alone. While you may not be able to conjure up a magnificently performing employee out of thin air, you do possess one of the best tools around for fixing Mr./Ms. Nightmare and keeping your best performer happy. The tool - Progressive Counseling.

Progressive counseling is a manager's best defense against mediocre performance and poor employee morale. Fortunately, using this tool is not as difficult as you might believe. With a little forethought, preparation, and follow-through, you have the ability to fix what appears to be impossibly broken.. Who knows, by following the steps of progressive counseling you may be Mr. Magic afterall.

### IDENTIFYING THE BROKEN PARTS

As managers, we have the mistaken expectation that our employees know what is required of them. After all, we've trained them. We've told them what they're doing right and what's wrong. Why they even have you as a role model whose footsteps they can follow. And in most cases that's enough. However in the case of your problem employee a more direct and clearly defined course of action is needed.

First and foremost you must help your problem employee recognize the deficient performance without destroying their motivation. Then you need to clearly state the changes that are required and then hold them accountable for achieving and maintaining the positive outcome. In other words, your problem employee needs a detailed account of what is going wrong, where they're missing the mark, and a roadmap describing the steps they must take to reach the goal. And you must do all this in a positive and motivating manner. Sounds tough, but it's not as daunting as it seem. With a little planning, preparation, and practice the improvement message can be easily and positively delivered.

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## PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Before you consider meeting with your problem employee you **MUST** be prepared. The most crucial part of preparation is to first write it down – the problem, the fix, and the steps to getting it fixed. That’s the secret of your success. If you are unable to clearly and unemotionally write down the problem and what needs to be done to correct it, then you aren’t ready to deliver a clear and concise message. If you are angry, frustrated, or not sure of your desired outcome, then you must temporarily step back from the situation until you can. Acting in anger or haste will only add to the problem. Once you have your plan in place its time to act.

## DELIVERING THE IMPROVEMENT MESSAGE

There are few simple points to keep in mind when you’re delivering the improvement message. First and foremost, that the primary purpose of the message is to act as a catalyst for improvement. Once the process starts, everything else falls quickly into place.

- **Focus on the problem and not on the employee.** Direct your comments toward the performance or behavior that needs attention rather than at the employee. By doing this you keep the employee from becoming defensive and ensure the conversation remains non-confrontational. You will ensure the employee’s ego doesn’t get in the way of hearing your message.
- **Be specific.** Avoid broad statements or negative commentary. State the facts and ask for a response.
- **Listen with empathy.** Listen to your employee’s response without judgement. Ask questions and ensure your understanding. When you demonstrate concern, employees are more receptive to making improvements.
- **Cut to the chase and assign the responsibility.** Avoid long winded lectures and negative reprimands. Make your point at the beginning of the conversation and let the employee know what is expected of them. As you conclude your counseling conversation ensure the employee knows they are responsible for their success.

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## The Bottomline

Delivering the improvement message while continuing to motivate a problem employee is not easy. Maintaining a high performance and motivated work team takes time, effort, and planning but the return on investment can be well worth it.

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